

CURRENT CINEMA

SPIDER-MAN: Into the Spider-Verse



***Phil Lord and Rodney Rothman go
multidimensional to find the heart of a hero***

BY DAVID SOMMERSET

Spider-Man is one of those characters who has been brought to the screen so many times--especially recently--it's hard to imagine how anyone could bring something fresh to the story.

But that's exactly the sort of challenge that *Jump Street* and *Lego Movie* creators Phil Lord and Chris Miller, along with regular collaborator Rodney Rothman, relish. Their latest, the CGI animated *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, approaches the web-slinging hero from a completely new point of view, and that risk pays off beautifully. While there have been several Peter Parkers (Tom Holland is the current live-action occupant of the suit in Marvel Cinematic Universe's *Avengers* movies and Sony's Spidey films), *Spider-Verse* chooses instead to focus on Marvel imprint Ultimate Comics' character Miles Morales. Created by Brian Michael Bendis and Sara Pichelli, Miles is a very different kind of Spider-Man, one whose family is intact and who comes from a Latino/African American background.

Miles (Shameik Moore) initially is not a web crawler at all, since Peter Parker (Chris Pine) already exists in his universe—at least until he is killed trying to stop the Kingpin (Liev Schreiber) from using a massive particle collider to search different dimensions, as the villain hopes to get a second chance at family life by finding new versions of his dead wife and son from a parallel universe. Soon, Miles goes through his own spider-bite experience, developing the regular assortment of Spidey abilities plus a few extras (including the ability disperse a powerful electrical charge at his enemies or turn invisible whenever he likes). Adapting a plotline from a 2014 run of the comic, the particle collider leads to multiple parallel dimensions bleeding into one another, and a variety of alternate Spider-folk are drawn out of their own reality and into that of Miles. He must team up with an older, schlubbier



Peter B. Parker (Jake Johnson); the monochromatic Spider-Man Noir (Nicolas Cage); Spider-Gwen (Hailee Steinfeld as a version of Parker's other girlfriend, Gwen Stacy); futuristic Peni Parker (Kimiko Glenn), who has no powers but uses an AI-controlled armored suit to help her fight; and the ever cartoony Spider-Ham, hilariously voiced by John Mulaney. Together they'll have to figure out a way to get the various Spiders back to their own worlds before the machine's "glitch" effect destroys everything in its path, including Miles' Brooklyn home.

It's a daring and dazzling mixture of animation styles, which from one minute to the next can range from a graffiti-artist sheen to a comic book come to life. And though there's plenty of the trademark humor you might expect from a Lord and Miller flick (Lord wrote the early drafts but Rothman took over once his partner set off on his ill-fated trip to the *Star Wars* universe with *Solo*), the script remains full of emotional depth. Rothman also scored his first directorial credit, working alongside DreamWorks veteran Bob Persichetti (also a first time director, but former animator and writer on *The Little Prince*) and Peter Ramsey (*Rise of the Guardians*). According to Lord, it was the idea of bringing Miles Morales to cinemas that first attracted the writers' attention when Sony's Amy Pascal pitched the idea of a new animated effort back in late 2014. "We'd been fans of Miles, and the thought of that suddenly made it feel necessary instead of diminishing returns, as he's such an appealing character," says Lord.

“Taking a look at his comic book and how well realized he and his family are by Brian and Sara, it just made us fall for him, and we did think there was an opportunity to talk about what these stories of heroism mean to our culture and why they’re so prevalent and keep being retold.”

As schedules and deadlines loomed, Lord realized it would be a good idea to bring in Rothman, and yet initially the scribe wasn’t so sure about taking the job. “Phil called and asked me to take a run at it while he was away. I told him he had the wrong person and that I love working with him and Chris, but it probably wasn’t going to be for me.” Exhausted from several other projects that hadn’t come to fruition—and from being a new dad—he was nevertheless willing to at least read the script. Thirty pages later, he’d written, “I love this!” on the document and agreed to collaborate, channeling his own Spidey fandom: “I grew up in Forest Hill in Queens and basically thought I was Peter Parker when I was a kid.” With directors Ramsey and Persichetti aboard, work proceeded on developing the movie’s visual style. All involved, including production designer Justin Thompson, were insistent on having it look different than other animated offerings. “The style is something that evolved over years,” Rothman says. “Specific people were instrumental in the early part of developing that style—I would say Jus-

